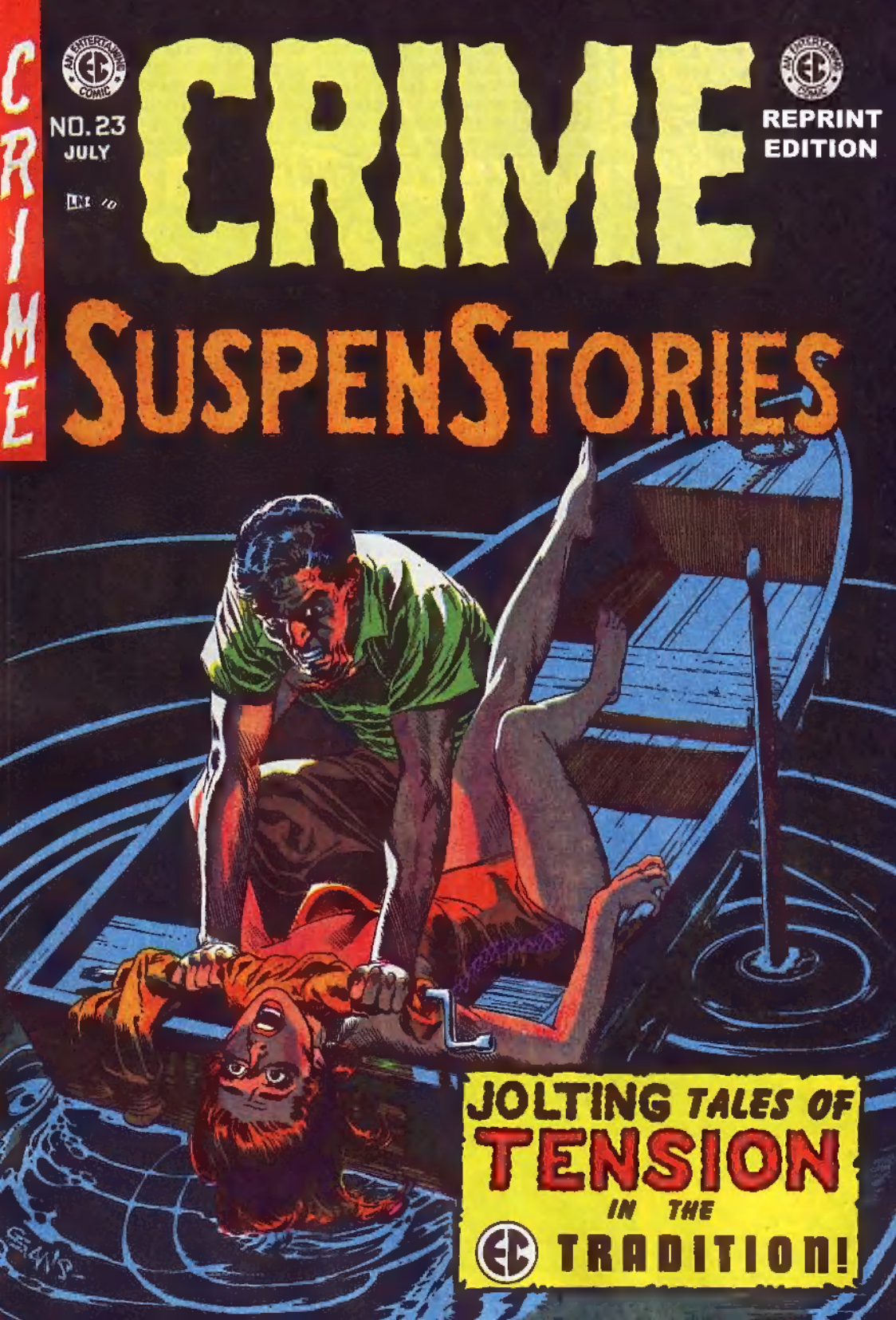
CRIME
NO. 23
JULY
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SUSPENSTORIES
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JOLTING TALES OF
TENSION
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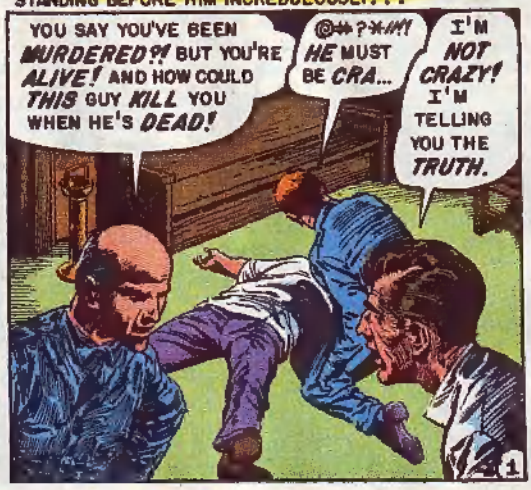
EC TRADITION!

THIS'LL KILL YOU!

IT WAS A CHILL BLUSTERING NIGHT AT THE END OF MARCH WHEN VICTOR GATTLING DRAGGED THE BODY INTO THE POLICE STATION... THE BODY OF JOE ENDERSBY, HIS BEST FRIEND. JOE ENDERSBY WAS DEAD. THE TWO POLICEMEN IN THE STATION HOUSE DIDN'T HAVE TO BE TOLD THAT. THEY COULD SEE HOW HIS SKULL WAS BASHED IN AND HOW HIS HAIR WAS MATTED DOWN WITH THICK DRIED BLOOD. THE DESK SERGEANT AND THE STATION CLERK STARED AT THE SHOCKING GRISLY SIGHT. BUT THEY WERE MORE SHOCKED AT THE WORDS THAT VICTOR GATTLING CROAKED HOARSELY FROM HIS THROBBING THROAT...

THE DESK SERGEANT CURSED AND KNELT OVER THE STILL-WARM BODY LYING ON THE STATION-HOUSE FLOOR. THE STATION CLERK LOOKED AT THE MAN STANDING BEFORE HIM INCREDULOUSLY...



THE MAN CALLED GATTLING BEGAN TO SOB. HE LOOKED AT THE SERGEANT AND THE CLERK AND HIS VOICE SEEMED TO COME FROM SO VERY FAR AWAY...

YOU SEE, I'M *GOING TO DIE*...IN AN *HOUR* OR SO. *HE* MADE *SURE* OF THAT... *ABSOLUTELY SURE*. SO I *KILLED HIM*... *JOE*...MY *BEST FRIEND*.

EASY, MISTER! BETTER TELL US THE *WHOLE STORY*... GET IT OFF YOUR *CHEST*...

I'M *SORRY!* I'M *SORRY* I'M *BAWLING LIKE A BABY*. I CAN'T *HELP* IT! I'LL...I'LL *TRY* TO PULL MYSELF *TOGETHER*. I *WANT* TO TELL SOMEBODY! I'VE *GOT* TO. AND I HAVE TO *HURRY*. TIME IS *RUNNING OUT*.

WE...JOE AND I...WE WORKED AT THE *GOVERNMENT LABS* OVER ON THE NEXT STREET...*BIOLOGICAL* LABS. WE WERE ASSIGNED TO A *TOP-SECRET PROJECT*...*VERY HUSH-HUSH*. WE WERE WORKING ON *GERM WARFARE*...

'BUT FIRST, LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT JOE AND ME. JOE... MY BEST FRIEND...I *THOUGHT!* WE PALLED AROUND TOGETHER IN COLLEGE. AND AFTERWARDS, FOR THE NEXT EIGHT YEARS, WE ROOMED TOGETHER, ATE TOGETHER, DOUBLE-DATED TOGETHER...AND WORKED TOGETHER...UP UNTIL LAST NIGHT...'

GOT THAT *NEW VIRUS READY*, JOE? *PINK EYES* IS WAITING FOR HIS *SHOT!*

RIGHT, VIC! I'LL FILL THE *HYPO!* 10ccs OUGHT TO *DO*...

'I WATCHED JOE REMOVE THE FLASK OF PLAGUE VIRUS WE'D DEVELOPED. I WATCHED HIM PLUNGE THE HYPO NEEDLE THROUGH THE RUBBER STOPPER, SUCKING THE LIQUID DEATH INTO THE CALIBRATED TUBE...'

YOU'LL GET THE *CREDIT* FOR THIS, VIC, AND YOU *DESERVE* IT...RUNNING THIS SHOW. YOU'VE GOT THE PENTAGON BRASS SITTING UP AND TAKING NOTICE OF *BRILLIANT YOUNG DR. VICTOR GATTLING!*

CAN IT, JOE! WE *ALL* HAD A HAND IN DEVELOPING THIS STUFF...

'THAT WAS JOE...ALWAYS SINGING MY PRAISES...PATTING ME ON THE BACK. ONLY THAT WASN'T THE *REAL* JOE! THE *REAL* JOE WAS...WELL, I'LL GET TO THAT. ANYWAY, JOE FILLED THE HYPO AND STARTED ACROSS THE LAB ROOM TO THE TABLE WHERE I HELD THE RABBIT. SUDDENLY...'

YIPES! VIC! LOOK OUT!

WHAT THE...?

'I HAD NO CHANCE TO DODGE. JOE'S FOOT SEEMED TO SKID ON ONE OF THE SLIPPERY FLOOR TILES. THE HYPO NEEDLE PLUNGED INTO MY ARM. WE STOOD THERE AWKWARDLY, CLUTCHING EACH OTHER, STARING AT THE EMPTIED HYPO. MY ARM STUNG. JOE'S FACE WAS ASHEN...'

VIC! MY GOD!

10ccs, JOE! THAT'S... THAT'S *FATAL*...ISN'T IT?

'PETE COLLINS AND CARL PRATHER RUSHED ACROSS THE ROOM FROM THEIR OWN LAB TABLES, STARING AT ME WIDE-EYED...'

GOOD LORD! VIC! WAS THAT VIRUS Y-44-GAMMA?

10ccs!

I...I SLIPPED! YOU SAW! I... IT WAS AN ACCIDENT!

THE NEW CULTURE OF BLACK PLAGUE... TEN TIMES MORE DEADLY THAN THE GERMS THAT WIPED OUT ONE THIRD OF EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE AGES!

ONE DROP OF VIRUS Y-44-GAMMA IS ENOUGH TO KILL AN ARMY! 10ccs. OF THIS TEST SOLUTION, DILUTED DOWN A HUNDRED THOUSAND UNITS, IS STILL SUFFICIENT TO KILL A MAN IN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS...

AND... GOOD GOD IN HEAVEN, VIC! THERE'S NO... NO... CHOKE...

'PETE DIDN'T HAVE TO SAY IT! WE ALL KNEW! THERE WAS NO ANTIDOTE... NO CURE! WE'D DONE OUR WORK TOO THOROUGHLY. IN A WAR, YOU MAKE SURE THE ENEMY HAS NO OUT... EXCEPT TO BE WIPED OUT! WE STARED NUMBLY AT EACH OTHER...'

NO... GASP... CURE!

'THEN JOE BROKE DOWN. IT WAS GHASTLY TO SEE HIM SOB WITH REMORSE. HE PLAYED THE PART SO WELL...'

VIC... OH, LORD... I... I KILLED YOU. MY BEST FRIEND. I... I... SOB... SOB...

JOE! WAIT! IT WAS AN ACCIDENT! DON'T BLAME YOURSELF! JOE...

'I PITIED JOE MORE THAN I PITIED MYSELF, NOT KNOWING HOW WASTED MY SYMPATHIES WERE...'

LET HIM GO, VIC! HE'S GOT TO BE ALONE NOW... TO MAKE HIS OWN PEACE. HE'S CAUSED THIS THING AND HE'S GOT TO GET OVER IT BY HIMSELF!

POOR JOE! I'M FACING DEATH... QUICK... MERCIFUL... AND HE'S FACING A LIFETIME OF TORTURE...

'THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE TO DO... NO DOCTOR TO SEE... NO ONE TO TURN TO... SO I LEFT FOR HOME...'

NEVER NOTICED BEFORE HOW BEAUTIFUL A MOONLIT SKY CAN BE...

'YES, ALL THE WAY HOME, I DRANK IN ALL THE THINGS I WAS GOING TO LEAVE... THE TANG OF THE SPRING NIGHT AIR IN MY LUNGS... THE FACES OF THE PASSING PEOPLE...'

...FOR THE LAST TIME...

'I LISTENED TO LAUGHTER...LETTING IT ETCH INTO MY NUMB SOUL...'

SOMEBODY...HAVING A PARTY...

'I SAW LOVE...WHICH I WOULD KNOW NO MORE AFTER TOMORROW...'

THEY LOOK...HAPPY...

'IT WAS ALL SO BITTER-SWEET, THIS FAREWELL TO LIFE, SOMEHOW... INSTINCTIVELY, I SUPPOSE...MY AIMLESS WANDERING FINALLY DREW ME TO...'

HAH! *MAKE ROOM*, MY FRIENDS! I'LL BE *CROWDING IN ON YOU BY TOMORROW NIGHT!*

'I LAUGHED ABOUT IT...JOKED ABOUT IT. BUT I WAS TRAVELING TO THE EDGE OF AN EMOTIONAL PRECIPICE... AND FINALLY...I FELL OFF...'

NO! I DON'T *WANT* TO DIE! *NOT YET!* WHY *MUST* I DIE? WHY DID IT HAVE TO *HAPPEN* THIS WAY?... SOBBB!...*WHY?*...SOB...SOB...

'IT HELPED. I CRIED IT OUT. AFTER ABOUT AN HOUR I WAS PURGED OF SELF PITY. I WENT ON TOWARD HOME, MORE CALMLY. AND THEN, MY FOOTSTEPS QUICKENED WITH A NEW... A *WONDERFUL* THOUGHT...'

JOE! WE'LL HAVE *FUN* TOGETHER...RIGHT UP TO THE *LAST*... *LIVE IT UP*... UP TO THE *END!* *THAT'S* THE WAY! *TOGETHER!* LIKE *ALWAYS!* *HELPING EACH OTHER. JOE! JOE!*

'I EXPECTED TO FIND JOE AT OUR APARTMENT, COWERING...LICKING HIS GUILTY WOUNDS. INSTEAD...'

HE'S *NOT HERE!* HE'S *PACKED* HIS *THINGS!* HE'S *LEFT TOWN!* *POOR GUY!* HE COULDN'T *FACE* ME. POOR... *POOR TORMENTED JOE!* HE...

'THE PHONE INTERRUPTED MY MUMBLINGS OF PITY. I PICKED UP THE RECEIVER...'

THAT *YOU*, VIC?

JOE! GOSH, I'M GLAD YOU *CALLED!* *WHY* DID YOU *PACK OFF*, YOU IDIOT? *THIS* ISN'T *YOUR FAULT!* *YOU* DIDN'T HAVE TO *LEAVE TOWN* LIKE A *GUILTY CRIMINAL!* LOOK! WE...

'BUT JOE'S NEXT WORDS FROZE ME, AS IF AN ICY WIND HAD BLOWN IN FROM THE ENDS OF THE UNIVERSE, TUMBLING THE WHOLE WORLD TOPSY-TURVY...'

NO, VIC! YOU'RE WRONG! I AM A CRIMINAL! THAT WAS NO ACCIDENT, MY SHOOTING THAT STUFF INTO YOU! I PLANNED IT!

J-JOE! YOU... YOU CAN'T MEAN... YOU... YOU WANTED TO KILL ME! BUT WHY? WHY? YOU'RE MY BEST FRIEND!

PAH! DON'T GIVE ME THAT 'BEST FRIEND' ROUTINE, IN THIS DOG-EAT-DOG SOCIETY, IT'S EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF... ALWAYS! AND YOU WERE ALWAYS GETTING THE CREDIT... THE GLORY... THE GRAVY...

JOE!... JOE!...

I'D MOVE INTO YOUR SPOT, IF YOU WERE OUT OF THE WAY! AND HOW PERFECT, WITH ALL THOSE BUGS JABBED INTO YOU... ALL NEATLY LOOKING LIKE AN 'UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT'! I TRIPPED, VIC! YEAH! ON PURPOSE...

NO, JOE! DON'T...

'I ALMOST CRUSHED THE PHONE IN MY WRITHING PERSPIRED HANDS AS HIS MOCKING VOICE DRONED ON...'

I MURDERED YOU, VIC! AND I'M IN THE CLEAR! PETE AND CARL WERE WITNESSES! THEY SAW THAT IT WAS NOTHING BUT A SHEER ACCIDENT! THEY'LL TESTIFY...

BLAST YOU! BLAST YOU...

'I RIPPED OUT THE PHONE, CUTTING OFF THIS GLOATING VOICE OF THE MAN I HAD ONCE LOVED AS A TRUE FRIEND. MY MIND SEETHED IN A FERMENT OF FURY...'

HE KILLED ME! HE'S MY MURDERER! BUT HE'S FREE... SAFE FROM JUSTICE!

'I WAS ALIVE NOW, BUT COME THE FOLLOWING EVENING, I'D BE DEAD... AS SURELY AS ANY MAN RIDDLED WITH BULLETS. I WAS A WALKING CORPSE ON BORROWED TIME. MY DATE WITH THE TOMBSTONE COULD NEVER BE CANCELLED. I GOT MY COAT...'

SAFE FROM THE LAW, IS HE?

WELL, HE'S NOT SAFE FROM ME! I'VE STILL GOT OVER TWELVE HOURS LEFT. I'LL FIND HIM! THE MURDER VICTIM SEEKING HIS MURDERER, BUT WHERE? THAT CALL WAS LOCAL! HE MUST BE AT THE RAILROAD STATION!

'BUT I DIDN'T FIND HIM AT THE RAILROAD STATION...'

NO, SUH! NO ONE CAME THROUGH THIS GATE WHO LOOKED LIKE *HIM*, SUH!

THANK YOU...

TRACK 5

'...NOR AT THE BUS TERMINAL...THE AIRPORT...'

SORRY, SIR! *NO ONE* BY THE NAME OF *JOSEPH ENDERSBY* BOOKED A *FLIGHT* FOR TONIGHT...

HE COULD HAVE USED AN *ASSUMED* NAME. THIS IS HIS PICTURE...

'AND THEN A THOUGHT STRUCK ME...'

WAIT! ACTUALLY, THERE'S *NO REASON* FOR HIM TO LEAVE TOWN. IN FACT, IT WOULD AROUSE SUSPICION IF HE *DID! OF COURSE!* HE'S PROBABLY HOLED UP IN SOME *HOTEL*...

'BUT A CHECK OF HOTELS, THE Y.M.C.A., EVEN SKID ROW TWO-BIT-A-BED JOINTS, ANYWHERE A MAN MIGHT SPEND THE NIGHT, LED NOWHERE...'

THIS GUY LOOKS LIKE A *GENTLEMAN!* THERE'S NOTHING BUT *BUMS* IN THERE!

ARE YOU *SURE? LOOK AGAIN!*

'WHEN DAYLIGHT CAME, I SPENT THE WEARY MORNING HOURS SEARCHING... CRUISING THE STREETS...HOPING TO CATCH A GLIMPSE OF HIM BUYING A PAPER...OR GRABBING BREAKFAST IN A RESTAURANT... ANYWHERE...'

TIME RUNNING OUT! ONLY *THREE MORE HOURS*...AND *THEN*...

WHAT'LL IT *BE*, MAC?

'I BEGAN TO FEEL FEVERISH! WAS IT BECAUSE I'D GONE WITHOUT SLEEP, OR WAS IT THE PLAGUE FEVER STARTING...THE ONE THAT WOULD BOIL UP SWIFTLY... CONSUMING ME IN A FATAL FIRE?...'

IT'S *TOO LATE!* HE'S *WON!* HE'S *WON!* HE...

NO! HE *HASN'T* WON! I CAN *STILL SPOIL* HIS SCHEME! I'LL *SMASH THE LAB*...*RUIN EIGHT YEARS WORK*. HE'LL *TAKE MY SPOT*, ALL RIGHT. *DISGRACE! INCOMPETENCE! WASTE!*

'I RUSHED TO THE LAB. IT WAS EVENING. NO ONE WOULD BE THERE. IT WAS PERFECT. I'D GO OUT WITH A BANG. AND THEN I SAW THE LIGHT...'

IT MUST BE *PETE*..., OR *CARL!* *BLAST!* I...I'LL TELL THEM TO *LEAVE!* I'LL TELL THEM I WANT TO BE *ALONE* FOR MY *FINAL HOURS*...

'BUT WHEN I OPENED THE DOOR QUIETLY, IT WASN'T PETE OR CARL! IT WAS THE *LAST* PERSON I EXPECTED TO SEE...'

JOE! JOE...HERE? OF *COURSE!* WHY *NOT?* *HE'S* GOT NOTHING TO *FEAR*...NO REASON NOT TO GO RIGHT *ON* WITH HIS WORK. NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT HIS CRIME...EXCEPT *ME*...

'I CREPT TOWARD HIM, SILENTLY. I PICKED UP A MICROSCOPE FROM A TABLE AS I NEARED HIM...'

HELLO, JOE!

HUH?

'I RAISED THE HEAVY MICROSCOPE...'

VIC...WAIT...

'AND BROUGHT IT DOWN WITH ALL MY MIGHT...'

VIC, LISTEN-N-N-UNNEGG!

'AGAIN AND AGAIN I SWUNG IN A FEVER-BLIND RAGE AT THIS VILE CREATURE WHO HAD MURDERED ME...'

UUHHH! UUHHH! UUHHH!

'...UNTIL MY ARMS GREW WEARY AND THE MICROSCOPE WAS STAINED SCARLET AND THE FIGURE ON THE FLOOR WAS DEATHLY STILL...'

YOU...*KILLED*...ME...JOE...GASP...BUT...YOU... *DIE*...GASP...*AHEAD*...OF...ME! THAT...GASP... *HELPS*...A *LITTLE!*

'THERE WAS NO NEED TO SMASH THE LAB, NOW! I PICKED UP HIS BODY AND CARRIED IT HERE...'

MY NAME IS...GASP...*GATTLING*... *VICTOR* GATTLING. I'VE BEEN *MURDERED*... AND I'VE BROUGHT IN MY *KILLER!*

YOU...YOU'VE BEEN *WHAT?! MURDERED!?*

VICTOR GATTLING STOOD OVER THE BODY OF HIS BEST FRIEND, JOE ENDERSBY, AND HIS VOICE FADED...

UNDERSTAND, SERGEANT? UNDERSTAND *NOW* HOW I'VE BEEN *MURDERED* AND HE'S THE *KILLER?*

YOU MEAN THERE'S *NOTHING* WE CAN *DO* FOR YOU, MR. GATTLING?

NO! NOTHING! JUST GET ME TO A HOSPITAL! THE FINAL CONVULSIONS WON'T BE PRETTY TO WATCH!

CALL AN AMBULANCE, CLANCY! I'LL TAKE CARE OF THE STIFF...

THE SERGEANT STARTED A ROUTINE EXAMINATION OF THE BODY, GOING THROUGH THE POCKETS. HE PULLED OUT A WHITE ENVELOPE... STARED AT IT A MOMENT, THEN...

YOU 'VIC'? *THIS* LETTER'S FOR *YOU!*

FOR *ME?* WHAT DOES IT *SAY?*

THE SERGEANT TORE OPEN THE ENVELOPE AND READ THE NOTE INSIDE. EVEN WITH DEATH SO NEAR, WAITING FOR THOSE FIRST CONVULSIONS TO BEGIN, I NOTICED THE LOOK OF HORROR ON HIS BURLY FACE...

GOOD LORD!

WHAT...WHAT *IS IT?*

HE WAS STARING AT THE WALL AS HE HANDED ME THE LETTER. I READ JOE'S FAMILIAR SCRAWL ALOUD...

'DEAR VIC,

IF YOU READ THIS LETTER *FIRST*, IT WILL MEAN YOU CAME *BACK* TO THE LAB TO *WRECK* THE JOINT IN *ANGER* AND I'VE *HANDED* IT TO YOU. THERE'S *ANOTHER* WAITING AT *HOME*, TOO! *THIS EXPLAINS* WHY YOU *DIDN'T DIE!* I JUST *COULDN'T RESIST*, WITH OUR *WORK SO GRIM!* WE *NEED LAUGHS!* *PETE* AND *CARL PLAYED ALONG*, OF COURSE!

THE *HYPO* HAD PLAIN OLD *DISTILLED WATER* IN IT, KID! SO IF YOU *STILL* HAVEN'T REALIZED WHAT *DAY*...IT...IS...'

I STARED AT THE WALL CALENDAR TOO...AT THE BIG FAT NUMERAL UNDER THE MONTH NAME...

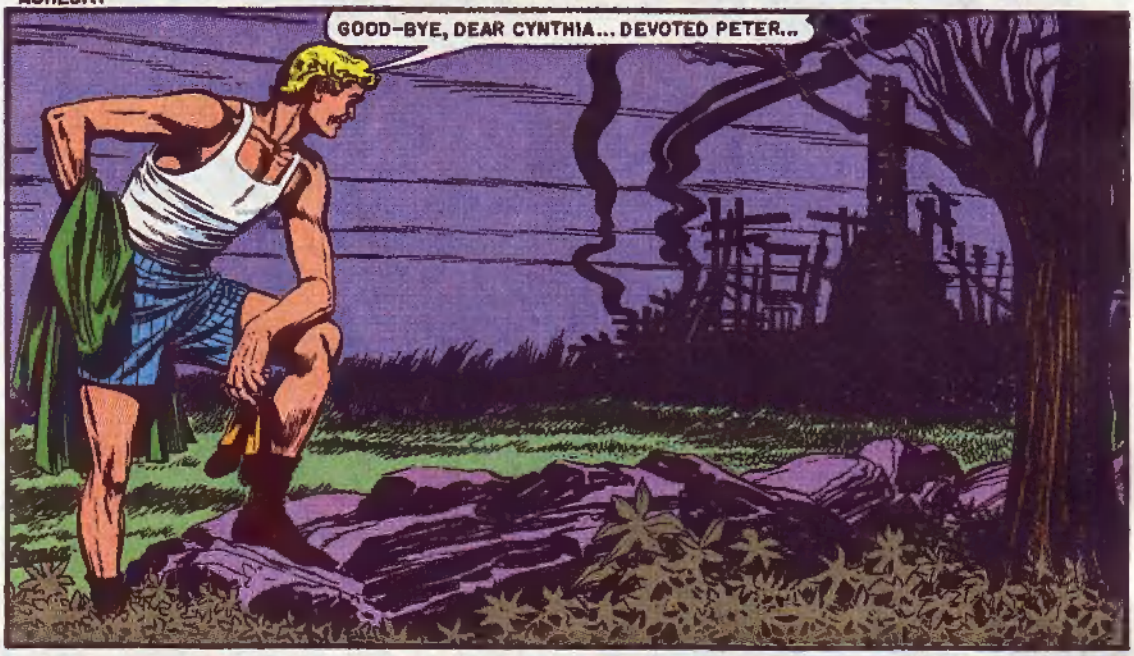
'...*APRIL FOOL!...*' CHOKE...

APRIL 1

THE END

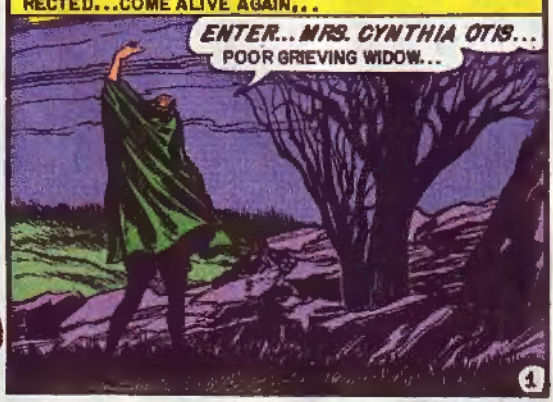
STANDING ROOM ONLY

CARL DUNN STOOD IN HIS UNDERWEAR, SHIVERING IN THE GREY CHILL OF THE EARLY DAWN, CLUTCHING THE PILE OF DAINTY WOMAN'S CLOTHES UNDER HIS ARM, AND STARING AT THE SMOKING EMBERS THAT WERE ALL THAT REMAINED OF THE CABIN IN THE HILLS. IT HAD BURNED LIKE A TINDER BOX, SHOOTING FLAMES SKYWARD FOR AN HOUR. BUT NOW IT WAS OVER AND NOTHING WAS LEFT BUT THE BURNED-OUT ASHES... THE BLACK LIFELESS ASHES...



YES, EVEN PETER AND CYNTHIA WERE MERE ASHES NOW. CARL GRINNED. TWO PEOPLE... TRAPPED IN A SUDDEN BLAZE. HIS WEALTHY BROTHER-IN-LAW, PETER OTIS... AND HIS TWIN SISTER, CYNTHIA. GAY, PRETTY, CYNTHIA... NOW JUST GAY PRETTY ASHES...

POOR DEAD CYNTHIA. CARL LAUGHED. HE LET HIS LAUGH RING OUT LOUD NOW, AS HE HAD LAUGHED INSIDE ALL THE WHILE THE FIRE HAD RAGED. BUT HE LAUGHED NOW BECAUSE CYNTHIA WOULD BE RESURRECTED... COME ALIVE AGAIN...



THE CLOTHES WENT ON EASILY OVER HIS LITHE FORM...CYNTHIA'S CLOTHES TRANSFORMING HIM, ALTERING HIS APPEARANCE. FINALLY, THE RIGHT DASH OF COSMETICS FROM CYNTHIA'S HANDBAG...AND CARL WAS *CYNTHIA REBORN*...

PERFECT! AS *ALIKE* AS *TWO PEAS IN A POD!* THAT'S WHAT PEOPLE ALWAYS *SAID* OF US!

FAR AWAY IN THE VALLEY, A SIREN WAILED...CRYING UP TO THE FADING STARS. HE WAS READY FOR THEM NOW...READY TO FOOL THEM AS HE HAD DONE SO OFTEN YEARS AGO... WHEN HE AND CYNTHIA WERE KIDS... EXCHANGING CLOTHES AND GOING TO PARTIES...FOOLING EVERYBODY...

HAVING *FUN*, CARL?

GREAT, SIS. JUST WAIT'LL *CHUCK ANDERS* FINDS OUT HE'S BEEN HOLDING *MY* HAND ALL EVENING 'STEAD OF *YOURS!* *HE'LL DIE!*

CARL'S THOUGHTS LEAPED ON... TO LESS GAY DAYS...TO GROWN-UP DAYS... TO THE DREARY MOMENT WHEN A LONG SERIES OF QUARRELS WITH CYNTHIA LED TO THEIR PARTING...

I'M NOT GOING TO WORK AS A MISERABLE *CLERK* JUST TO SUPPORT YOU AND MOM! NOT *ME!* I WANT TO *LIVE!* I'M *GOING* PLACES!

YOU'RE *NO GOOD*, CARL... *DESERTING* US LIKE THIS! IF YOU *LEAVE NOW*, DON'T *EVER* COME BACK...*EVER!*

CARL HAD BEEN SATISFIED WITH THAT ARRANGEMENT. HE WAS ABLE TO ESCAPE HIS RESPONSIBILITIES. BUT HE'D DRIFTED AFTER THAT...DRIFTED DOWNWARD...UNTIL HE COULD SINK NO LOWER...

CAN YUH SHPARE A DIME, MISHTER...FOR A CUP O' COFFEE...

HMMMPH...

THEN, ONE DAY, AS HE'D PAWED THROUGH A RUBBISH HEAP SEARCHING FOR SOME EDIBLE MORSEL UNTOUCHED BY CRAWLING THINGS, HE SAW THE ANNOUNCEMENT IN THE SOCIETY COLUMN OF THE YELLOWED SMELLY NEWSPAPER...

SIS! HER *PICTURE!* SO SHE'S MARRIED INTO *MONEY*, EH? HMMM!

PETER AND CYNTHIA OTIS THEE DURING HAVE RETURNED FROM THEIR HONEY-MOON AT PINE OAKS AND ARE NOW LIVING AT THE OIL KING'S PALATIAL ESTATE IN EXCLUSIVE EASTWOOD.

AS VULTURES ALWAYS SEARCH OUT AND FIND THEIR PREY, SO CARL HAS FOUND CYNTHIA...

SOME CLASS! PROBABLY SO *SLUMMING* IN *THIS BABY!* THERE'S A *SCRATCH* ON THE FENDER!

HEY, YOU! MOVE ALONG! NO LOITERING HERE...

IT WAS PETER OTIS, CYNTHIA'S WEALTHY HUSBAND. HE'D BEEN ABOUT TO KICK CARL OFF THE PLACE WHEN HE'D GOTTEN THE SHOCK OF HIS LIFE. CYNTHIA'D COME OUT AND...

PETER! WAIT! GOOD HEAVENS! IT *CAN'T* BE! IT *IS!* IT'S *CARL! MY BROTHER!*

YOUR *WHAT?! BROTHER?* YOU NEVER *TOLD* ME...

CARL HAD SNEERED...

SURE! SHE WAS *ASHAMED* TO *ADMIT* SHE HAD A *CRUMB* FOR A *BROTHER*...EH, SIS?

SAME OLD CARL... SARCASTIC... CYNICAL! JUST WHAT DO YOU *WANT*, CARL?

AREN'T YOU GLAD TO *SEE* YOUR LONG LOST BROTHER, SIS? DON'T YOU WANT ME TO *STAY* A WHILE? AFTER *ALL*... BIG HOUSE...PLENTY OF ROOM... YOU'RE *LOADED* NOW...

STOP IT, CARL! YOU'RE *NOT GOING TO MOVE IN... MOOCH ON US!* YOU *LEFT* ME AND MOM WHEN WE *NEEDED* YOU MOST! SHE *DIED* BECAUSE SHE HAD TO WORK! I'LL *NEVER FORGIVE* YOU...FOR... THAT!

C'MON, SIS! YOU CAN'T TURN AWAY YOUR OWN FLESH-AND-BLOOD! LOOK! I'M IN RAGS! I'M *HUNGRY!* I'M SORRY FOR WHAT I DID!

MY HEART BLEEDS FOR YOU, CARL!

HERE! TAKE THIS AND GET OUT! GET OUT... AND DON'T EVER COME BACK!

A HUNDRED BUCKS! A *LOUSY HUNDRED* WHEN YOU GOT *MILLIONS!* I OUGHT TO SPIT IN YOUR EYE! BUT...I'LL TAKE IT! I NEED IT...

CARL HAD LEFT IN A SNARLING JEALOUS RAGE...JEALOUS OVER HIS SISTER'S GOOD FORTUNE. AND IT WAS A BITTER ACID EATING INTO HIS BRAIN. HE REALIZED THAT HE COULD NEVER SHARE IT... NEVER WHEEDLE ANOTHER DIME OUT OF HER...

SHE'S GOT *MILLIONS*...AND ME, *NOTHING! ME*, HER *OWN TWIN BROTHER*...*TURNED AWAY!*

AND THEN, THE IDEA WAS BORN...OUT OF ANGER AND HATE AND GREED...

OF COURSE! HER *TWIN BROTHER!* LIKE *TWO PEAS* IN A *POD!* I COULD CHANGE PLACES *AGAIN*...FOOL *EVERYBODY*...

HE'D THOUGHT IT ALL OUT, FEVERISHLY...FIENDISHLY...SPENT EVENINGS SNEAKING AROUND SISTER'S PALATIAL ESTATE...LISTENING... OBSERVING...

IT'S ALL IN ORDER, PETER! JUST SIGN HERE! THE WILL LEAVES YOUR *ENTIRE ESTATE* TO *CYNTHIA!*

THAT'S THE WAY I *WANT* IT, GEORGE. SHE'S MADE ME *SO HAPPY*...

THE LAST PIECE OF CARL'S PLAN HAD SLIPPED INTO PLACE. HE'D LET HIS HAIR GROW...INVESTED THE HUNDRED IN ELECTROLYSIS TREATMENTS, REMOVING HIS WHISKERS...CULTIVATED HIS NAILS...AND WAITED. AND THE ITEM IN THE PAPER HAD INDICATED THE TIME WAS RIGHT...
PERFECT! PERFECT!
MR. AND MRS. PETER OTIS LEAVING EASTWOOD ESTATE FOR BRIEF RESPITE AT PINE OAKS, THE OIL KING'S SUMMER HOME IN GLEN FALLS.
CYNTHIA AND PETER HAD SLIPPED AWAY FROM THEIR GAY SOCIAL WHIRL TO QUIET ISOLATED PINE OAKS. CARL HAD GONE THERE... PREPARED...
LONG HITCH-HIKE...BUT NOW...NOW...
THEY'D SAT COZILY BEFORE THE HUGE STONE FIRE-PLACE, WHERE THE BLAZING LOGS CRACKLED MERRILY, OBSCURING THE SOUNDS OF THE DOOR OPENING BEHIND THEM...THE CREEPING FOOTSTEPS...THE DEADLY WHISH OF THE HARD RUBBER BLACK-JACK...
AND GLOATING OVER HIS CUNNINGNESS, CARL HAD STRIPPED CYNTHIA'S UNCONSCIOUS FORM OF ITS CLOTHING...
NICE OF YOU, CYNTHIA...TO GIVE ME THE CLOTHES RIGHT OFF YOUR BACK...
THEN HE'D DRESSED CYNTHIA IN HIS CLOTHES...THE CLOTHES HE'D WORN...
...SO THAT IF THE POLICE SIFT THE ASHES, THEY'LL IDENTIFY YOUR BODY AS MINE...
AND POURED KEROSENE LEADING FROM THE FIREPLACE AROUND THE LUXURIOUSLY APPOINTED CABIN...
HAPPENS ALL THE TIME...SPARKS FROM A FIREPLACE...COUPLE ASLEEP...CABIN BURNS...
AND SO, ONLY AN HOUR BEFORE, CARL HAD STOOD WATCHING THE FLAME DANCE WILDLY TOWARD THE CLOUDS WHERE HIS CASTLE-IN-AIR WAS BUILT...
GOOD-BYE, DEAR CYNTHIA... DEVOTED PETER...

THE APPROACHING SIREN AROUSED CARL, RETURNING HIM FROM HIS REVERIE TO THE AWARENESS OF HIS PRESENT SURROUNDINGS AND SITUATION. NOW, HE WOULD HAVE TO BE CAREFUL... MAKE NO MISTAKES...

WELL, CYNTHIA! GO INTO YOUR ACT!

THE STATE POLICE LISTENED TO 'CYNTHIA'S' SOBBING STORY...

I WAS *OUTSIDE*... FOR A BREATH OF *FRESH AIR* WHEN THE *FIRE* BROKE OUT. THE *CABIN*... SOB... *SHEETS OF FLAME*... MY *HUSBAND SCREAMING*... SOB... MY *BROTHER*... *TRAPPED*... CHOKE... I WAS *HELPLESS*...

CARL'S VOICE HAD ALWAYS BEEN HIGH-PITCHED FOR A MAN... MATCHING CYNTHIA'S LOW CONTRALTO...

WHAT A *TERRIBLE ORDEAL*, MRS. OTIS! YOU SAY YOUR *BROTHER* WAS IN THERE TOO...

YES! WE'D *PITIED* CARL... TAKEN HIM *ALONG*... TAKEN HIM ALONG TO HIS *DEATH*... SOBBB...

THEY WERE FOOLED, ALL RIGHT... NOT THE SLIGHTEST SUSPICION. THE TROOPERS MADE OUT THEIR REPORT AND CARL GLOATED INWARDLY...

TWO BODIES... MALE... TOTALLY BURNED. PETER OTIS... CARL DUNN... DECEASED...

LEAVING *ME*... 'CYNTHIA' OTIS... A WIDOW... HEIR TO MY POOR HUSBAND'S ESTATE...

NOR WAS PETER'S LAWYER, GEORGE L. BERRY, SUSPICIOUS. HE EXHIBITED ONLY PITY FOR THE BERIEVED 'WIDOW' AND 'HER' HEARTBREAKING DOUBLE TRAGEDY...

PETER... SOB... CARL...

YES, MY DEAR! I KNOW! YOU CAN'T THINK OF THE WILL NOW. COME TO MY OFFICE WHEN YOU FEEL UP TO IT AND WE'LL SETTLE THE FINAL PAPERS.

THE INQUEST... THE FUNERAL... THE PROBATION OF THE WILL... ALL RAN OFF WITHOUT THE SLIGHTEST HITCH. CARL WAS COCKY WHEN HE WENT TO THE LAWYER'S OFFICE. THERE WAS NOTHING HE'D FORGOTTEN... NO DETAIL, HE'D SLIPPED UP ON. HE'D EVEN REMEMBERED TO USE CYNTHIA'S PERFUME...

AHH... I'VE ALWAYS *LIKED* THAT SCENT, CYNTH... ER... *MRS. OTIS*. OR... OR... *MAY* I CALL YOU... *CYNTHIA*?

WHY... IF YOU *LIKE*, MR. BERRY!

WHAT WAS THIS? CARL WAS ALMOST CONVULSED. WHY, GEORGE BERRY, FRIEND OF THE FAMILY, WAS MAKING A *PLAY* FOR THE RICH HEIRESS... THE SLY DOG...

PETER'S *GONE* NOW, CYNTHIA. I CAN *SAY* IT NOW! YOU'RE... YOU'RE *LOVELY*, MY DEAR!

WHY, *MR. BERRY!* YOU *FLATTERER*!

HYSTERICAL INSIDE, CARL PLAYED ALONG...FOR LAUGHS. HIS LAUGHS. WHY NOT? THE MONEY WAS ALMOST HIS. JUST A FEW PAPERS LEFT TO SIGN. WHY AROUSE BERRY'S IRE...

IF YOU'D *LIKE*...*GEORGE*...YOU CAN TAKE ME OUT FOR A *DRINK* LATER... AFTER OUR NASTY OLD *BUSINESS* IS SETTLED!

GOOD! GOOD! I KNOW A *NICE QUIET LITTLE PLACE!* NOW *LET'S SEE*...

CARL REMEMBERED TO ACT THE GRIEVING WIDOW AS THE WILL WAS READ, DABBING DAINTILY AT 'HER' NOSE...SNIFFLING SADLY...

...AND THAT'S *IT*, CYNTHIA. THIS WILL GIVE YOU *CLEAR CLAIM* TO AN ESTATE WORTH OVER *THREE MILLION DOLLARS*...

OH, *PETER*... SOBBB... *PETER*...

THEN...A TOSS OF 'HER' HEAD...CHIN-UP CYNTHIA...

BUT, IT'S *OVER* NOW, GEORGE! I NEED A *CIGARETTE!* DO YOU *HAVE* ONE...

OF *COURSE*... *HERE*...

OH, I'M *SORRY*, CYNTHIA. THAT WAS *RUDE* OF ME...

THAT'S ALL RIGHT, GEORGE. *THANKS*...

CARL DID NOT LIKE THE SUDDEN PUZZLED STARE IN THE LAWYER'S EYES...HIS SILENT THOUGHTFUL PREOCCUPANCY...

WELL, GEORGE? SHALL WE HAVE THAT *DRINK*?

HUH? OH...YES! OF *COURSE!* *LET'S GO!*

BUT ONCE THEY'D HAD A FEW DRINKS IN THE 'QUIET LITTLE PLACE' GEORGE KNEW, CARL WORRIED NO MORE. THERE WAS NO NEED TO...

CYNTHIA... YOU *LOVELY WITCH!* YOU HAVE SUCH *GEORGEOUS EYES*... SUCH *LUCIOUS LIPS*. WHAT MAN COULD *RESIST* THEM?

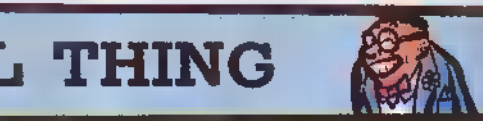
PLEASE, GEORGIE... *NOT HERE!*

YES, THERE WAS NO NEED TO WORRY...NOT WITH THE EAGER PASSION HUSKING GEORGE'S VOICE...THAT LUSTING GLEAM IN HIS EYES...

THE *FOOL!* BUT IT *PROVES* I'M *SAFE*...*UTTERLY SAFE*...

THE EVENING WORE ON. GEORGE ORDERED MORE AND MORE ROUNDS OF DRINKS. CARL GREW GAY. THIS WAS MORE FUN THAN A BARREL OF MONKEYS...LEADING THE OLD BOY ON...
CYNTHIA, HONEY... YOU'RE THE MOSH BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORL'...
OH, GEORGE! YOU DON JUAN! ER...EXCUSE ME! I'LL BE RIGHT BACK...
CARL GLIDED PAST THE EMPTY TABLES...CHUCKLING TO HIMSELF. ALL WAS WELL. HE'D PLAYED HIS PART PERFECTLY. TOMORROW HE WOULD COLLECT THE INHERITANCE, AND THEN...
PARIS...VIENNA... A LIFETIME OF LAVISH LIVING...
NO SUSPICION! NOT WITH GEORGE BERRY, A SHARP LAWYER TRAINED TO WADE THROUGH LIES AND DECEPTIONS, COMPLETELY FOOLED...PURSUING HIS, 'CYNTHIA'S', CHARMS. CARL PUSHED OPEN THE REST ROOM DOOR...
AN ALCOHOLIC CLOUD EXPLODED AWAY AND GEORGE BERRY GASPED...
SO THAT'S IT! THAT'S WHAT BOTHERED ME BACK IN THE OFFICE...
IT WAS WHEN I TOSSED CYNTHIA THOSE CIGARETTES. I READ ABOUT IT ONCE. SOMETHING BY MARK TWAIN. A WOMAN MAKES A LAP WITH HER SKIRT TO CATCH A THROWN OBJECT...A MAN CLOSES HIS KNEES TOGETHER...CATCHES WITH HIS HANDS...
A PHONE CALL...AND THEY WERE READY FOR CARL...
WAITING...
WE'VE GOT A MAN IN THE ALLEY IN CASE HE TRIES TO GET OUT THAT WAY, MR. BERRY!
YES! 'CYNTHIA'...WHOEVER HE IS...MUST HAVE REALIZED HIS MISTAKE BY NOW. THEY SAY THEY ALWAYS MAKE ONE SMALL MISTAKE... ISN'T THAT RIGHT, LIEUTENANT?
I WOULDN'T SAY THIS ONE WAS SUCH A SMALL MISTAKE, BERRY!
MEN'S R

THE REAL THING



Printed on the door were the words: LAST LAUGH NOVELTY CO. The bulkier of the two men in the rumpled pin-striped suits nodded, and they stepped into the office. The wall clock showed 5:32 . . . the office help was gone for the day. The two men strode across bright red carpet, past cases in which were displayed false mustaches, electrified cigarette cases, bloated plastic noses with cleverly concealed flashlight bulbs, and ordinary-looking water glasses with tiny holes through which fluids were sure to drip on hapless victims.

The skinnier man opened a door marked, SIMON GOOBER, PRES. Inside, a bald-headed gent looked up from a kidney-shaped desk, surprise on his flabby face. A young blond man, who had been leaning over the desk, also glanced up. Then retreated nervously as the bulky newcomer patted an ominous bulge in his pocket. "This here's a you-know-what, chums," he said flatly. "It makes a terrible racket when I press the trigger. Don't get adventurous and nothing'll happen. The wall safe peeking out from behind a corner of that picture . . . I'd like for you to open it!" Mr. Goober nodded uneasily to the young assistant. And so the picture was pushed aside, a dial twirled, a circular door swung open and a thick wad of green bills handed to the bulky pin-striped man. For a moment there was silence, while a thick thumb riffled through the bills. Then, suddenly, the gun-toter hit Mr. Goober's assistant smartly across the face.

"You think I'm dumb, mebbe?" he asked. "This is *stage* money! *YOU,"* he said to Mr. Goober. "You got a check-book, fatso? Make out a check to *cash* for all but a hunnerd bucks in your bank account. Since it's Friday night . . . and banks don't open till Monday morning . . . you can't stop payment, sport!"

Mr. Goober obediently took a pen from his pocket, while his assistant fumbled a check-book from the desk. The pen scratched and, the moment it had stopped, the bulky man ripped the check from the book. He glanced at it, smiled, folded it carefully and pointed to Mr. Goober's breast pocket. "Them cigars you got stashed in your pocket, blubber?" he demanded. Simon Goober half-rose from his chair, protesting, but a heavy hand tore the five zeppelin-shaped objects from his pocket. "Thanks, chump!" the bulky man snickered. The next instant the two pin-striped goons were gone.

"I-I couldn't help but notice the check, sir," blubbered the young man. *"$5,208!* That just about wipes out . . ." "Fiddlesticks!" snorted Mr. Goober. "The pen I used is filled with one of our own brands of disappearing ink. In a half-hour those yokels'll be stuck with a blank check. All they've gotten for their trouble is exercise!" Mr. Goober lunged to his feet and began to pace the room like a caged animal. "W-What's the trouble, sir?" asked the assistant. "If it's those *cigars*, they can't be worth more than a dollar each, and . . ." ". . . and they're absolutely *irreplaceable!"* bellowed Mr. Goober, clenching his flabby fists to show the extent of his rage. "I had them specially prepared for me, to present to members of my wife's family . . . who are dining with us tonight!" "On the way home, can't you buy . . ." whispered the assistant. "Not THAT brand, you dolt!" roared Mr. Goober, his face livid. "Only THOSE cheroots are good enough for my in-laws!" There was a moment of silence, while Mr. Goober reined in his bare emotions. Then, in a voice quaking with anguish, he continued. "Those perfectos contain the finest sun-cured tobacco obtainable," he said. "Also, copious quantities of magnesium and gunpowder. They are designed expressly to create a ring-tailed disturbance when lit. I was looking forward with great relish to seeing my estimable father-in-law's whiskers blown clear off his face! Now my whole evening's gone pffffft!"

RETURN BLOW

I'M STANDIN' HERE IN THE ATTIC OF THIS CRUMMY ROOMIN' HOUSE WE LIVE IN, COUNTIN' OFF THE LAST SIXTY SECONDS THAT STAND BETWEEN ME AND A FORTUNE...THE LONGEST MINUTE OF MY LIFE. MY THROAT FEELS LIKE IT'S GOT A FIST SHOVED DOWN IT, GAGGIN' ME SO BAD I FEEL LIKE I WANT TO PUKE. MY HANDS ARE ICY AND THEY SHAKE SO MUCH I GOT TROUBLE HOLDIN' ONTO THE BINOCS. A LOT OF SUCKERS HEAR OPPORTUNITY WHEN IT KNOCKS. I RECOGNIZED MY CHANCE FROM THE START. I GOT BEHIND IT AND SHOVED. YEAH, I WAITED THIRTY-THREE LONG HARD YEARS FOR A BREAK. I'M WAITIN' UP HERE NOW TO SEE IT PAY OFF. AND WHAT IS THAT NITWIT WIFE OF MINE DOIN'? SHE'S STANDIN' OUTSIDE THE ATTIC DOOR, PLAYIN' A JERKY WOMAN GAME WITH ME...

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT A GUY THAT'S GONNA DIE...THAT IN THE LAST MINUTE OF HIS LIFE, HE SEES HIS WHOLE PAST FLASH BEFORE HIM. WELL, THAT'S HOW IT IS HERE WITH ME NOW, WITH ALMA COOIN' OUTSIDE THE ATTIC DOOR. ONLY I AIN'T GETTIN' READY TO DIE. IN A MINUTE, I'M GONNA JUST BEGIN TO *LIVE!*...

I SEE MYSELF A YEAR AGO, DELIVERIN' BUTTER AND EGGS TO THE SANFORD MANSION ACROSS TOWN. THAT WAS MY BIG BREAK...THAT WAS WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKED...'CAUSE THAT'S WHEN I MET ALMA. SHE WAS WORKIN' FOR RICH OLD LADY SANFORD AS A PAID COMPANION...

ONE LOOK AT ALMA WAS ALL I NEEDED. I HAD HER NUMBER. SHE WAS LIVELY... WARM... AND LONELY FOR A *DIFFERENT KIND* OF COMPANIONSHIP...

YOU'D BETTER *GO*. MISS SANFORD TOOK A *DISLIKE* TO THE MAN *BEFORE* YOU... *THAT'S* HOW HE *LOST HIS JOB!*

AND WE WOULDN'T WANT *THAT* TO HAPPEN TO ME, *WOULD* WE, DOLL?

I WORKED ON ALMA. ONE DAY I TOLD HER I'D BE BACK TO SEE HER THAT NIGHT WHEN THE OLD GAL WAS ASLEEP. SHE SAID NO, BUT I WENT ANYWAY. SHE SAW ME FROM HER BEDROOM WINDOW...

...AND A MINUTE LATER SHE WAS IN MY ARMS. I'D SIZED ALMA UP RIGHT. SHE WAS MY KIND... AND WE BOTH WANTED THE SAME THINGS...

SHE... SHE'S *UPSTAIRS*... *SOUND ASLEEP*. BE *VERY QUIET*...

LIKE A *MOUSE*, BABY!

I'D HAD PLENTY OF WOMEN BEFORE ALMA. BUT IT WAS DIFFERENT WITH HER. I TOOK A BIG TUMBLE...

MARRY YOU, LUKE? WHY... I... I... I... *CAN'T!* I CAN'T *LEAVE* MISS SANFORD. I'M ALL SHE *HAS*... HER *ONLY FRIEND!*

THAT DON'T MAKE *SENSE*, HONEY! *WHAT* IF THE OLD HAG *IS* LONELY! WE'VE GOT TO THINK ABOUT *US!*

THEN I CAUGHT ON. I COULD SEE IT IN HER EYES...

OH, *I GET IT!* IT'S HER *DOUGH!* YOU'RE FIGURIN' ON COMIN' *INTO* A *HUNK* OF IT IN HER *WILL!*

I'VE *PUT UP* WITH HER FOR *FIVE YEARS*... FIVE *GOOD* YEARS OF *MY LIFE*. I'VE TAKEN HER *ABUSE*... LISTENED TO HER CROCHETY *COMPLAINTS*. I'M *NOT* GOING TO RUN OUT *NOW*. *SHE* WON'T LIVE *FOREVER!* SHE'S WORTH A *QUARTER MILLION!*

I SHOWED ALMA HOW THINGS COULD STILL WORK OUT AND A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, SHE BROKE THE NEWS TO OLD LADY SANFORD...

THEN YOU'LL BE *LEAVING* ME, ALMA! YOU MIGHT HAVE *TOLD* ME *BEFORE!* IT WILL TAKE *TIME* TO GET SOMEONE *ELSE!*

I DON'T *HAVE* TO LEAVE YOU, MISS SANFORD. I COULD COME KEEP YOU *COMPANY* DURING THE *DAY*. AND... PERHAPS LUKE COULD *WORK* FOR YOU!

AFTER WE WERE MARRIED, MISS SANFORD TOOK ME ON AS A GENERAL HANDYMAN ONLY BECAUSE SHE DION'T WANT TO LOSE ALMA. I MADE MYSELF HANDY ALL RIGHT...

BUT I *NEVER* EAT IN *HERE*, LUKE! I USUALLY...

DON'T DISTURB YOURSELF, MISS SANFORD. IT'S *NO TROUBLE!* TRY IT! YOU'LL *LIKE* IT!

I KNEW HOW TO GET AROUND THE OLD LADY. SHE WAS ACHIN' FOR A MAN'S ATTENTION. SHE'D NEVER HAD IT BEFORE. I HEAPED IT ON PLENTY. I COULD SEE HER HARD SHELL CRACKIN' ALL AROUND HER..

I DON'T *LIKE* HAVING MY *GARDEN* HACKED UP, LUKE! STILL...SIGH... THEY *ARE BEAUTIFUL!* I CAN'T *REMEMBER* THE LAST TIME SOMEONE BROUGHT ME *FLOWERS*...

I'D LIKE TO BRING YOU FLOWERS *EVERY DAY*, ER...HENRIETTA! YOU DON'T *MIND* IF I CALL YOU HENRIETTA...?

SO AFTER THAT, IT WAS HENRIETTA AND LUKE! BUT I HAD TO DO SOMETHIN' BIG... SOMETHIN' THAT'D SHOW HER WHAT A *GOOD FRIEND* I WAS AND HOW MUCH SHE *NEEDED* ME. AND MY CHANCE CAME, ONE DAY, WHEN THE OLD GAL WAS TAKIN' A NAP...

LUKE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THOSE *PAPERS? LUKE!* SHE'LL *BURN* TO DEATH...

TAKE IT *EASY*, BABY! I'M *NOT COOKIN'* THE *GOOSE* THAT'S GONNA LAY OUR *GOLDEN EGG!* NOT *YET!*

I WAITED UNTIL I COULD HEAR THE OLD BAT CHOKIN' AND GASPIN' IN HER SLEEP, AND THEN I RUSHED BACK INTO THE ROOM AND SNATCHED HER OFF THE BURNIN' BED...

I...CHOKE...I COULD HAVE *BURNED TO DEATH*...GASP! YOU *SAVED MY LIFE!*

ALMA! QUICK! GET A *PAIL OF WATER!*

IT WAS A SMALL FIRE... JUST BIG ENOUGH TO SCARE THE LACE PANTS OFF THE OLD GAL... AND MAKE HER EXTREMELY GRATEFUL TO ME. THE PAIL OF WATER DOUSED IT...

LOOKS LIKE A *SHORT CIRCUIT* IN YOUR LAMP WIRE *STARTED* IT! I'D BETTER *CHECK ALL THE WIRING IN THE HOUSE!*

OH, ALMA... LUKE! I'M SO... SO *ALONE* HERE. DON'T *EVER* LEAVE ME. YOU WON'T BE *SORRY!* I *PROMISE* YOU!

A FEW DAYS LATER, ALL MY PLANNING AND SCHEMING PAID OFF. THE OLD LADY CALLED US INTO THE LIBRARY...

THE MAN WHO JUST *LEFT* IS *MARTIN SCHUMAN, MY ATTORNEY.* I'VE HAD HIM DRAW UP A *NEW WILL. HERE*... I'D LIKE YOU BOTH TO *READ IT*...

I SHOOK LIKE JELLY AS I READ THAT BEAUTIFUL HUNK OF LEGAL STATIONARY! OVER A *QUARTER OF A MILLION BUCKS* IN CASH AND SECURITIES! SHE WAS LEAVIN' IT ALL TO ME AND ALMA...

SEE, LUKE? *SEE?* I *TOLD* YOU! ALL WE HAVE TO DO NOW IS *WAIT*... AND *SOMEDAY* THE WORLD WILL BE *OURS*...

I DON'T *LIKE* WAITIN', ALMA! SHE MAY LIVE TO BE *NINETY!* SHE MAY *OUTLIVE US*, EVEN

SHE'S GOTTA *DIE*, ALMA! YOU *KNOW* THAT'S THE WAY IT'S GOT TO BE!

I...I *KNOW*, LUKE! ONLY... FOR GOD'S SAKE... *DON'T* TELL ME *HOW*... OR *WHERE*... OR *WHEN* YOU ARE GOING TO *DO* IT! I *DON'T WANT TO KNOW.*

BY THE TIME WE REACHED THAT CRUMMY LITTLE BOARDING HOUSE WHERE ALMA AND I LIVED, I HAD THE WHOLE SCHEME WORKED OUT! ALMA DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW, SO I DIDN'T TELL HER...

I'M *AFRAID*, LUKE! IF SOMETHING *HAPPENS* TO MISS SANFORD, AND IT LOOKS *FISHY*...

IT'LL BE DONE *RIGHT*, BABY! *DON'T WORRY!* NOBODY WILL BE ABLE TO PROVE A *THING!*

THE NEXT DAY, WHEN WE CAME HOME FROM THE OLD GAL'S HOUSE, I STOPPED IN AND BOUGHT A BIG BOX OF CHEAP CANDY. THAT NIGHT, AS WE SAT IN OUR FURNISHED ROOM, I WRAPPED IT UP AND ADDRESSED IT...

WHAT TIME DOES THE *MAIL ARRIVE* AT THE MANSION IN THE MORNING, ALMA?

I DON'T *KNOW!* I USED TO GO OUT AND *GET* IT AT *TEN* WHEN I WAS *LIVING* WITH HER, BUT I DON'T KNOW *WHEN* IT WAS *DELIVERED*...

BESIDES! YOU *CAN'T* MAIL ANYTHING *NOW!* THE POST OFFICE *CLOSES* AT 6:00 P.M.!

THE *DOORS STAY OPEN* TILL *9:00*, BABY! BE A GOOD GIRL AND RUN OVER AND *DROP THIS IN THE PACKAGE CHUTE*...

I'D PUT PLENTY OF STAMPS ON THE PACKAGE, AND THE NEXT MORNING, WE PARKED ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE BIG OLD HOUSE AND WAITED FOR THE MAIL TO BE DELIVERED. ABOUT 9:00 OR SO, THE POSTMAN CAME ALONG...

LUKE,.. IS...IS THERE ANYTHING *WRONG* WITH THAT CANDY?

LOOK, BABY! YOU *ASKED* ME NOT TO TELL YOU HOW OR WHERE OR WHEN, SO... LET'S JUST SAY IT'S A *PRESENT* FOR THE OLD GAL AND *LET IT GO AT THAT!*

AT EXACTLY 10:00 A.M., HENRIETTA CAME OUT FOR HER MAIL...

YOU SAY YOU USED TO *BRING* HER THE MAIL AT *10:00 A.M.* WHEN YOU *LIVED* WITH HER?

YES! IT WAS PART OF THE *ROUTINE!* SHE *GOT UP* AT *9:00*, HAD HER *BATH*, THEN *BREAKFAST*, THEN RETIRED TO THE *LIBRARY* AND SENT ME OUT FOR IT! IT WAS *ALWAYS* AT ABOUT *10:00!*

I KNEW IT WOULD BE THAT WAY. I KNEW OLD PEOPLE SETTLE DOWN INTO HABITS...HABITS THAT AREN'T EASILY BROKEN. HENRIETTA SANFORD WAS USED TO READING HER MAIL AT 10:00 IN THE MORNING. THAT'S ALL THERE WAS TO IT...

YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE *DONE* IT, LUKE! YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE SPENT THE *MONEY!*

JUST A LITTLE *PRESENT*, HENRIETTA! *GO ON... TRY ONE*...

ALMA TURNED WHITE AS THE OLD GAL MUNCHED A CARMEL. SHE LOOKED RELIEVED WHEN I TOOK ONE FOR MYSELF. I HAD TO LAUGH. ALMA'D FIGURED THE CANDY WAS POISONED. BUT I WASN'T *THAT* DUMB...

IT'S THE *NICEST* THING THAT'S HAPPENED TO ME IN *YEARS! IMAGINE*, AT *MY AGE*, RECEIVING A *PRESENT* FROM A *GENTLEMAN FRIEND!*

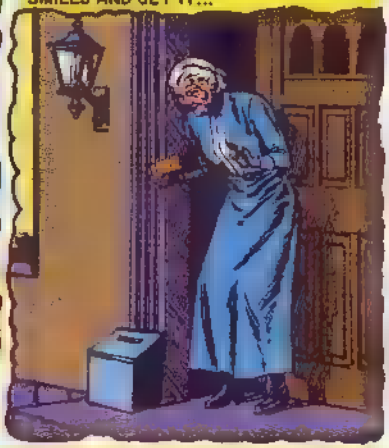
NOW *WAIT* A MINUTE! IT'S FROM *ME TOO!*

HEH, HEH! LOOK WHO'S GETTIN' JEALOUS, HENRIETTA!

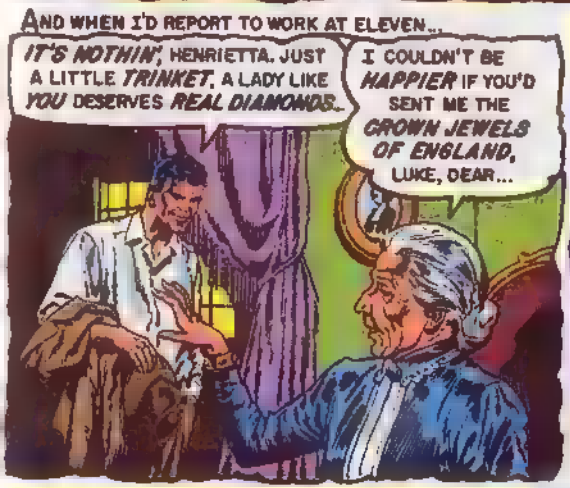
SO THAT WAS THE DEAL. EVERY FEW DAYS, I BOUGHT SOMETHIN'... A HANDKERCHIEF... A BOOK... ANY KIND OF CHEAP TRINKET... FOR THE OLD LADY. I'D WRAP IT AT NIGHT, PUT OUR RETURN ADDRESS ON IT SO SHE'D BE EAGER TO OPEN IT, PUT THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF STAMPS ON IT...

...AND SEND ALMA TO THE POST OFFICE WITH IT, WHERE SHE'D DROP IT INTO THE PACKAGE CHUTE...

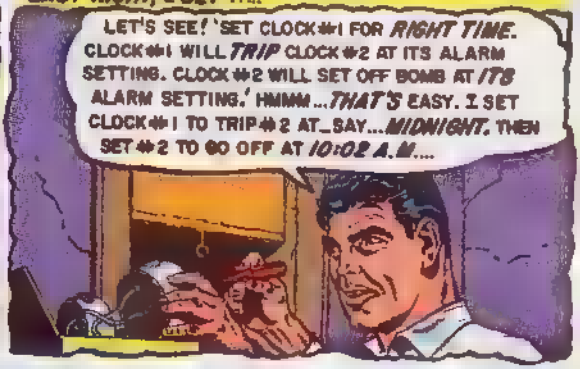
AND EVERY MORNING I SAW THE MAIL DELIVERED AT ABOUT 9:00, AND THEN, LATER, AT EXACTLY 10:00 A.M., SAW HENRIETTA COME TO THE DOOR ALL SMILES AND GET IT...



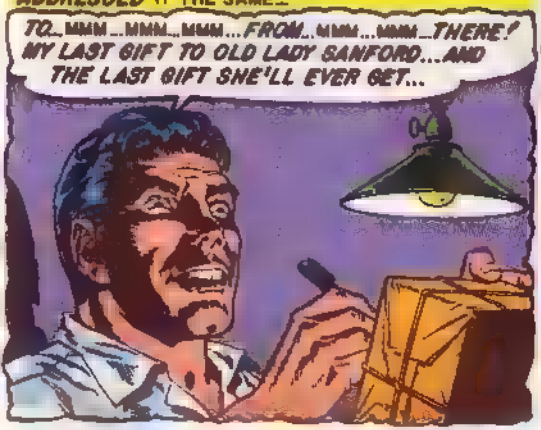
AND WHEN I'D REPORT TO WORK AT ELEVEN...



THEN I GOT HOLD OF THE BOMB. A GUY SOAKED ME FIFTY BUCKS FOR IT BECAUSE IT HAD TO RUN MORE THAN TWELVE HOURS AND NEEDED TWO TIME CLOCKS SO'S IT WOULDN'T GO OFF IN THE POST OFFICE. AND LAST NIGHT, I SET IT...



THEN I BURNED THE DIRECTIONS AND WRAPPED THE BOMB AS I'D WRAPPED ALL THE OTHER PACKAGES. I USED THE SAME PAPER... THE SAME PEN... EVEN ADDRESSED IT THE SAME...



AND, AS USUAL, I GAVE THE PACKAGE TO ALMA TO MAIL AT THE POST OFFICE BEFORE THE DOORS WERE CLOSED FOR THE NIGHT...

LAST NIGHT, I DIDN'T SLEEP ALL NIGHT. I TOSSED AND TURNED, THINKING ABOUT THAT BOMB TICKIN' AWAY IN THE POST OFFICE...

LUKE! C'MON OUT, HUH? YOU'LL LIKE THIS SURPRISE!

SCRAM, WILL YOU, ALMA? I'LL BE OUT AFTER... AFTER...

THIS MORNING I RUSHED UP HERE IN THIS DIRTY OLD ATTIC WITH THESE BINOCS. I CAN SEE THE SANFORD MANSION FROM HERE. I'LL BE ABLE TO SEE THE ROOF BLOW OFF IT...

LUKE! WE'RE GONNA BE RICH, LUKE! GUESS HOW I KNOW!

YEAH, BABY! YEAH... WE'LL BE RICH!

TWENTY SECONDS TO GO AND ALMA'S STANDIN' OUT THERE, GIGGLIN' AND RAPPIN' ON THE DOOR, AND PLAYIN' HER STUPID GIRLY GAME...

I MEAN WE ARE RICH, LUKE... RIGHT NOW! C'MON OUT AN' SEE!

STOP BOTHERIN' ME, YOU DUMB JERK! I'M NOT COMIN' OUT UNTIL...

TEN SECONDS... AND ALMA'S VOICE... DRIFTIN' THROUGH THE DOOR...

OLD LADY SANFORD IS DEAD, LUKE!

YEAH! SHE WILL BE... IN... IN... WHAT!

FIVE SECONDS... AND ME FUMBLIN' WITH THE LOCK ON THE DOOR, SHAKIN' 'CAUSE I DON'T KNOW IF ALMA IS JOKIN' WITH ME AND THEN I'LL MISS THE BIGGEST SECOND IN MY LIFE, OR...

HOW DO YOU KNOW? HOW COULD YOU? IT'S NOT TIME...

IT'S THE PACKAGE, LUKE... THE PACKAGE I MAILED FOR YOU LAST NIGHT! THEY RETURNED IT! SEE WHAT IT SAYS!

ONE SECOND...

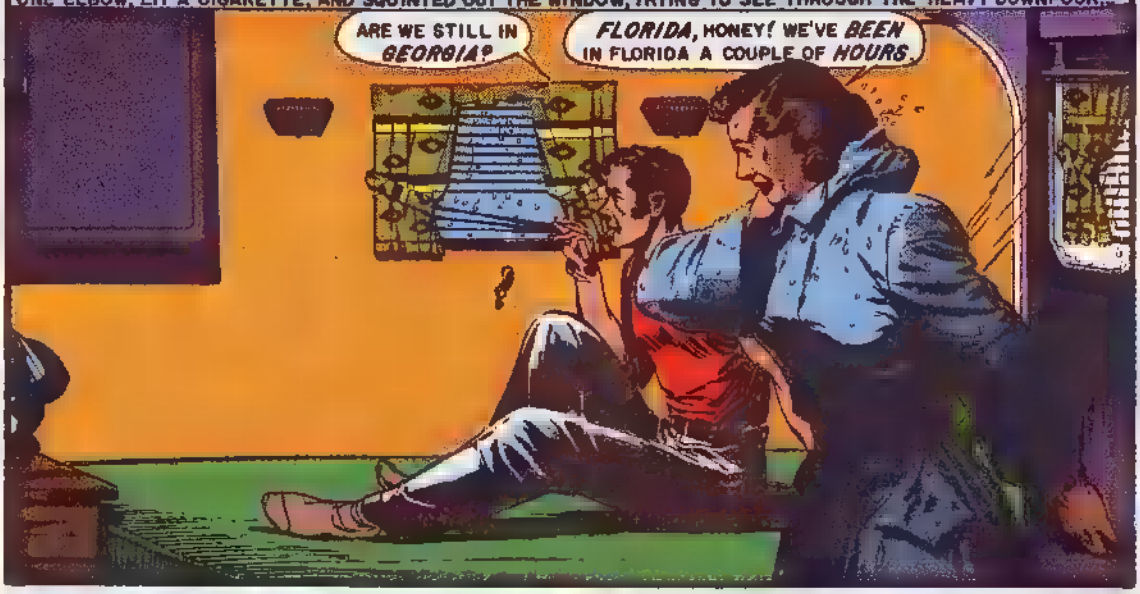
GOOD... LORD! CHOKE...

DECEASED! SHE'S DEAD, LUKE! SHE MUST HAVE DIED YESTERDAY... AND...

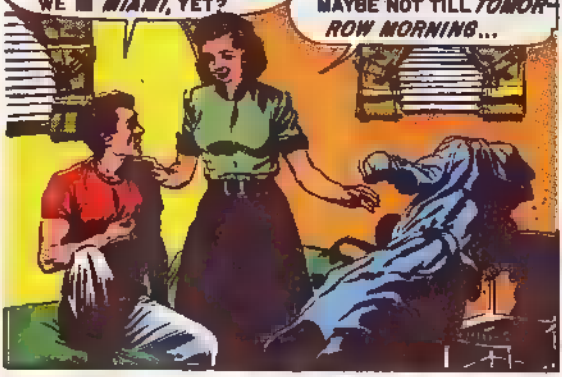
BLAMMM!

LAST RESORT

THE RAIN WAS BEATING A STACCATO RHYTHM ON THE ROOF AND WINDOWS OF THE NEW TRAILER. IT WAS WARM AND COMFORTABLE INSIDE. BUT WHEN MONA OPENED THE TRAILER DOOR, A COLD DAMP DRAFT BLEW ACROSS JERRY WHEELER. MONA HAD ENTERED QUIETLY, TRYING NOT TO AWAKEN HER YOUNG HUSBAND. SHE LOOKED AT HIM POSSESSIVELY, BUT JERRY WAS ALREADY AWAKE. HE GLANCED AT MONA WITH WEARY CONTEMPT, RAISED HIMSELF UP ON ONE ELBOW, LIT A CIGARETTE, AND SQUINTED OUT THE WINDOW, TRYING TO SEE THROUGH THE HEAVY DOWNPOUR...



MONA HAD BOUGHT THE TRAILER FOR JERRY. SHE'D BOUGHT THE TRIP TO FLORIDA FOR JERRY. SHE'D BOUGHT JERRY... AND THEY BOTH KNEW IT...



MONA LOVED JERRY PASSIONATELY. SHE COULD NEVER GET ENOUGH OF JERRY. BUT JERRY DIDN'T LOVE MONA... AND THEY BOTH KNEW THAT, TOO...

MONA STOOD BESIDE JERRY AS HE SHAVED, FEELING THE INVITING WARMTH OF HIS BODY. BUT SHE COULD SENSE HIS INWARD COLDNESS, AND THE COLD TONE OF HIS VOICE FILLED HER WITH DISAPPOINTMENT...

WE COULD STAY *HERE*, HONEY! I COULD *FIX US UP* SOMETHING...

NO! I WANT TO GET OUT AND *SEE* PEOPLE. I'M *TIRED* OF BEING COOPED UP...*LOOK*, MONA, *I CAN'T SHAVE* WITH YOU HANGING ON ME LIKE THAT!

BY THE TIME THEY LEFT THE TRAILER, THE RAIN HAD STOPPED AND THE SUN HAD COME OUT. THE WARMING RAYS CHEERED JERRY AND HE WALKED BRISKLY AHEAD OF MONA, THE WAY HE ALWAYS DID, AS IF HE WAS ASHAMED OF BEING SEEN WITH HER...

THIS IS MORE *LIKE* IT! MAN, THAT SUN FEELS GOOD!

WAIT FOR *ME*, HONEY. YOU *KNOW* I CAN'T KEEP UP IN THESE HIGH HEELS.

TRAILER PARK

IT WAS A TOURIST TOWN FULL OF THOSE MODERN EATERIES THAT TOURISTS GO FOR. THEY WENT INTO THE FIRST PLACE THEY CAME TO... THE VILLA PALMS. MONA LOOKED OVER THE MENU. JERRY LOOKED OVER THE WAITRESS...

...AND TWO ORDERS OF RED SNAPPER.

I DIDN'T *ASK* YOU TO ORDER ME *FISH!* I'LL HAVE A *SIRLOIN STEAK*, MEDIUM, AND A BOTTLE OF BEER.

SURE, JERRY KNEW HE WAS BOUGHT AND PAID FOR, BUT HE DIDN'T LIKE HAVING MONA SHOW EVERYONE THINGS WERE THAT WAY. HE DIDN'T LIKE BEING TOLD WHAT TO WEAR AND WHAT TO EAT...

WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO *WISE UP*, MONA? *I'LL* DO MY *OWN ORDERING!*

JERRY... PLEASE...

JERRY DIDN'T CARE WHO HEARD HIM YELL AT MONA OR SAW THAT HIS FACE WAS FULL OF CONTEMPT FOR HER. HE HOLLERED TILL SHE GOT UP FROM THE TABLE AND STUMBLED TO THE POWDER ROOM SO PEOPLE WOULDN'T SEE HER CRY WITH HUMILIATION...

I'M A *BIG BOY!* I CAN *TAKE CARE OF MYSELF. I DON'T NEED NOBODY MOTHERING ME!*

HE SAT THERE, GRUMBLING HALF-ALOUD, IGNORING THE COLD STARES OF THOSE AROUND HIM... IGNORING THE MAN WITH THE BADGE...

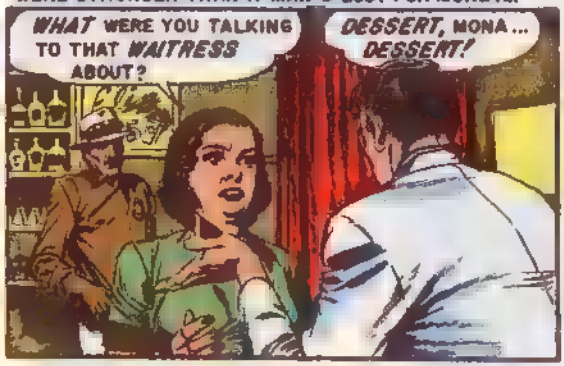
...*OLD BAG!* I OUGHT TO TAKE A *WALK* ON HER... ACTING LIKE I WAS SOME *DUMB PUNK SHE PICKED UP...*

THE WAITRESS RETURNED AND JERRY WAS SMILING AGAIN. HE EYED HER UP AND DOWN, DRINKING IN THE SWAY OF HER HIPS AND THE WAY HER BODY MOVED, AND THERE WAS A HUNGER IN HIM THAT SIRLOIN STEAK, MEDIUM, COULDN'T SATISFY...

THEY SURE RAISE 'EM *PRETTY* DOWN HERE. WHAT'S YOUR *NAME*, BABY?

JANE! JANE YARBORO...

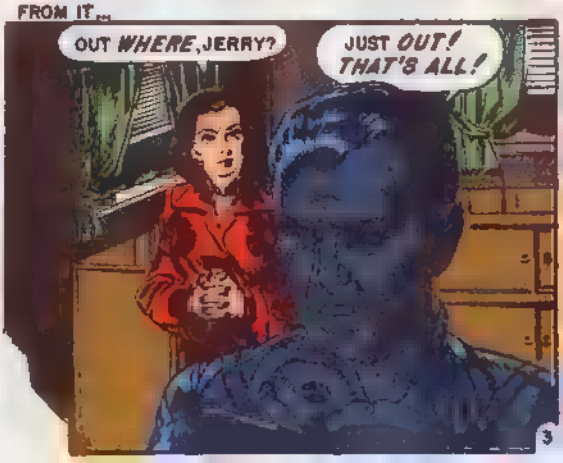
MONA WAS THE JEALOUS TYPE. SHE WATCHED JERRY THE WAY A DOG WATCHES A BONE. SHE'D SEEN HOW HE'D LOOK AT YOUNGER, PRETTIER WOMEN WITH THAT HUNGER IN HIS EYES, AND SHE KNEW THAT SOME THINGS WERE STRONGER THAN A MAN'S LUST FOR MONEY...



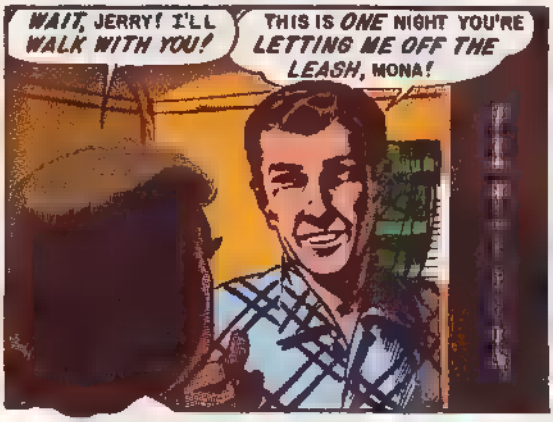
BUT MONA HELD THE PURSE STRINGS. IT MADE JERRY FEEL CHEAP AND ASHAMED WHEN SHE REACHED FOR THE CHECK AND PAID THE WAITRESS. HE FELT LIKE CRAWLING INTO A HOLE, THE WAY JANE YARBORO SMILED FAINTLY AND GAVE HIM THAT QUICK FUNNY LOOK WHEN HE HAD TO ASK...

THEY STAYED IN THE TRAILER THE REST OF THE DAY, NOT TALKING. JERRY WAS SULLEN, AND MONA KNEW IT WAS BETTER NOT TO TALK WHEN HE WAS LIKE THAT. HE PACED UP AND DOWN AND SMOKED A LOT. A LITTLE AFTER SEVEN, HE REACHED FOR HIS JACKET...

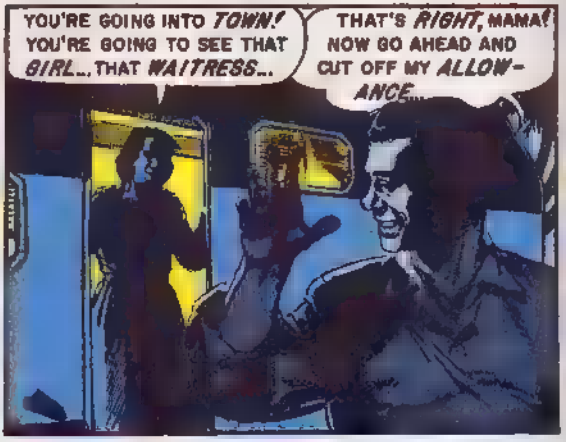
JERRY PICKED UP MONA'S PURSE, EXTRACTED A BILL FROM IT...



HE STARTED OUT OF THE TRAILER, STARING BACK AT MONA IN COLD DEFIANCE...



MONA SCREAMED AFTER HIM...

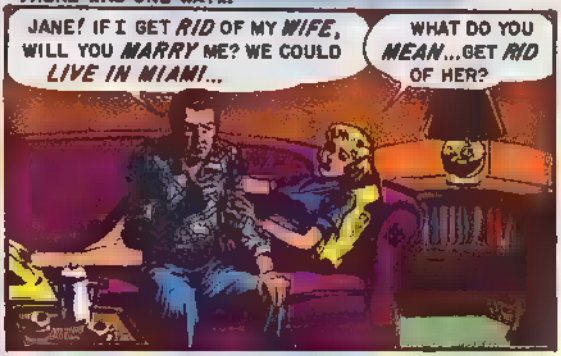


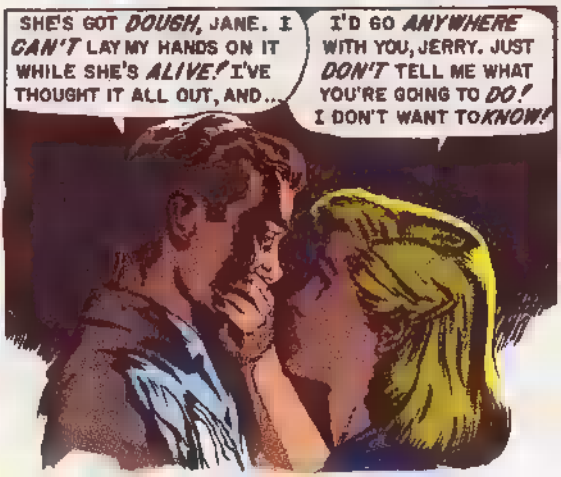
THE PALM FRONDS RUSTLED IN THE TRAILER CAMP, SOUNDING LIKE AN EVENING SUMMER SHOWER. THE WARM STILL NIGHT AIR WAS EXCITING WITH THE FRAGRANT SCENT OF ORANGE BLOSSOMS AND HONEYSUCKLE. SOON, JERRY'S HEELS WERE CLICKING ALONG THE SIDEWALK IN TOWN. HE WAS FULL OF EAGERNESS AND IMPATIENCE WHEN HE REACHED THE VILLA PALMS RESTAURANT...

JANE YARBORO CAME OUT AT SEVEN-THIRTY. SHE SEEMED SURPRISED TO SEE HIM, BUT SHE SMILED AND SPOKE SOFT WORDS WHEN SHE FELT THE TREMBLING IN HIS HANDS AND SAW THE LOOK IN HIS EYES...

SO IT WAS THE BAR... AND THE WALK TO HER PLACE... AND THE HUNGRY KISS BEFORE SHE INVITED HIM IN...

AFTER JANE, JERRY KNEW HE'D NEVER BE ABLE TO STAND MONA ANY MORE. HE'D HAVE TO GET RID OF HER... BUT WITHOUT GIVING UP HER MONEY! SCHEMES BOILED ■ HIS MIND LIKE IN A STEAMING CAULDRON. THERE WAS ONE WAY...





THE NIGHT WAS THE SAME WHEN JERRY RETURNED TO THE TRAILER CAMP... THE SCENT OF PALM FRONDS... THE SCENT OF ORANGE BLOSSOMS AND HONEYSUCKLE. ONLY *JERRY* WAS DIFFERENT...

HE HAD IT ALL FIGURED OUT. WHEN HE REACHED MONA'S CAR, HE TOOK THE KEY FROM THE IGNITION AND UNLOCKED THE TRUNK. HE REMOVED THE JACK-HANDLE, WRAPPING IT IN HIS JACKET...

THEN HE WENT INTO THE TRAILER. MONA WAS AWAKE...WAITING FOR HIM...

JERRY CROSSED TO THE BUNK AND SAT DOWN BESIDE MONA. HE LEANED OVER, BRINGING HIS LIPS CLOSE TO HERS...

BUT THEIR LIPS NEVER MET. WITH SWIFT, DELIBERATE MOVEMENTS, HE BROUGHT THE JACK-HANDLE ACROSS HER THROAT AND PRESSED DOWN WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH, HISSING BETWEEN CLENCHED TEETH...

A FEW MINUTES LATER, JERRY CAME OUT OF THE TRAILER, GOT BEHIND THE WHEEL OF MONA'S CAR AND DROVE OUT OF THE CAMP. HE CAUTIOUSLY KEPT TO THE BACK ROADS, HIS EYES ALERT FOR A SUITABLE SPOT TO BURY MONA'S LIFELESS BODY...

THE LAKE APPEARED UNEXPECTEDLY, SHIMMERING IN THE MOONLIGHT. THE LAKE WAS THE ANSWER...

HE GOT THE OARS FROM THE TRAILER, UNLASHED THE ROWBOAT FROM THE CAR-ROOF, AND DRAGGED IT THROUGH THE THORNY THICKETS TO THE WATER'S EDGE...

THERE'S ENOUGH DOUGH IN MONA'S BAG TO KEEP JANE AND ME GOING FOR MONTHS... BUT IT'S JUST A DROP IN THE BUCKET COMPARED WITH WHAT'LL BE COMING TO ME *EVENTUALLY!*

HE GATHERED ALL THE HEAVY THINGS HE COULD FIND IN THE CAR AND TRAILER AND TOOK THEM DOWN TO THE NARROW LAKE SHORE. LAST OF ALL HE DRAGGED MONA'S BODY DOWN...

THOSE *WEIGHTS* WILL KEEP HER BODY *SUBMERGED* FOR A GOOD LONG TIME...

HE FASTENED THE HEAVY THINGS TO MONA WITH ROPE, WIRE, AND TIRE CHAINS... COAXED THE WEIGHTED BODY INTO THE ROWBOAT...

HALFWAY BETWEEN THE TWO SHORES, HE JETTISONED HIS GRUESOME CARGO, WHISPERING GRIMLY...

'BYE, MONA... AND *THANKS FOR EVERYTHING!*

HE DROVE BACK TO THE TRAILER CAMP AND PARKED. HE WAS EXHAUSTED. WITH COLDBLOODED INDIFFERENCE, HE SAT UPON THE MURDER BUNK, UNDRESSING...

I'LL SELL EVERYTHING SHE GAVE ME. MAYBE IT'LL BE A *FEW YEARS* BEFORE I CAN GET HER DECLARED *LEGALLY DEAD*, BUT THEN JANE AND ME WILL BE ABLE TO LIVE *HIGH, WIDE,* AND *HANDSOME...*

HE SLEPT LIKE AN INNOCENT BABE THAT NIGHT. IF HE DREAMED ABOUT ANYTHING, IT WAS JANE YARBORO. IN THE MORNING, HE DRESSED EXCITEDLY, ANXIOUS TO TELL HER THE NEWS...

HOWDY! MY NAME'S *COLEB.* I'M THE *SHERIFF* 'ROUND THESE PARTS!

HUH? WELL, WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH *ME?*

I'D LIKE TO TALK TO YOUR *WIFE,* MR. WHEELER!

SHE *AIN'T HERE!* SHE *LEFT LAST NIGHT.* WE HAD AN *ARGUMENT!*

THE GIMLET-EYED SHERIFF LOOKED AT THE ROWBOAT LASHED TO THE CAR-ROOF. HE LOOKED AT THE BURRS CLINGING TO JERRY'S PANTS LEGS...

SHE *WALKED OUT ON ME* BECAUSE OF SOME *GIRL!* SHE WAS *SORE* BECAUSE I...

I HAD A *TALK* WITH THAT GIRL HALF AN HOUR AGO, MR. WHEELER. YOU *BETTER COME ALONG WITH ME!*

THEY DROVE IN SILENCE TILL THEY REACHED THE LAKEFRONT SOME DISTANCE FROM TOWN. JERRY FELT HIS STOMACH KNOT UP WHEN THEY GOT OUT. THERE WERE PEOPLE AROUND, STARING AT HIM...

THEY *CAN'T* KNOW ABOUT MONA! I *WEIGHED DOWN THE BODY!* THIS IS A *BLUFF!*

GET IN THAT BOAT, MR. WHEELER!

AS THE LAUNCH PUT-PUTTED OUT TO THE MIDDLE OF THE LAKE, JERRY BECAME NERVOUS... FRIGHTENED. HOW *COULD* THEY HAVE FOUND THE BODY? *HOW?*

THOSE WEIGHTS WERE ON *GOOD!* I MADE *SURE* OF THAT! THEY *COULDN'T* HAVE FOUND HER UNLESS THEY *DRAGGED THE BOTTOM...*

THE SHERIFF CUT THE MOTOR AND LOOKED AROUND, MAKING SURE OF WHERE HE WAS. JERRY TRIED TO SOUND ANNOYED, BUT HIS VOICE TREMBLED GIVING AWAY HIS NERVOUS FEAR...

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT? IF YOU'VE GOT SOME *CHARGE* AGAINST ME, *MAKE IT!*

WHEELER! DO *YOU* KNOW *WHERE YOU ARE*... WHAT *TOWN* YOU'RE IN?

HE KEPT TELLING HIMSELF THEY COULDN'T HAVE FOUND MONA SO SOON. IT WAS *IMPOSSIBLE*...

ALL I KNOW IS, THIS IS FLORIDA! I WAS ASLEEP WHEN WE GOT HERE. I NEVER CARED WHERE I WAS WHEN I WAS WITH HER. SHE KEPT NAGGING ME ABOUT LOOKING AT OTHER DAMES. I WAS SICK OF LISTENING. I'M *GLAD* SHE *LEFT* ME...

SHERIFF COLES KNELT AND LIFTED THE HATCH COVER FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE LAUNCH...

THIS IS A *TOURIST'S PARADISE*, WHEELER. *THOUSANDS* OF PEOPLE COME HERE EVERY DAY TO *LOOK!* *THIS MORNING, THEY ALL SAW THIS...*

SAW...?

JERRY LOOKED DOWN THROUGH THE GLASS BOTTOM OF THE LAUNCH. MONA WAS THERE, LOOKING UP AT HIM, HER STARING EYES AND HER DEATH-MASK GRIN MAGNIFIED BY THE CRYSTAL CLEAR WATER...

WELCOME TO *SILVER SPRINGS*, MR. WHEELER!

CHOKE... *OH, NO...*

THE END

The Old Witch